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ABSTRACT

Australia launched its initial program of teaching English to adult migrants in the late 1940's. At times, bilingual methods were used, a trend that is returning. At that time, attempts were made to educate Australian people in the acceptance rather than rejection of migrants. Today there exists a variety of full-time, intensive, and accelerated courses in addition to the evening, distance, and correspondence programs. While efforts have progressed, there is much to do to overcome prejudice between and within minority groups and to create a well-integrated multicultural society. Demographic reports have begun to acknowledge migrants' social and cultural impact. The child migrant education program began in 1970, but still needs well-trained personnel. In a major shift in policy, migrants are encouraged to maintain their native language and cultural heritage, and ethnic schools and bilingual curricula are increasing. However, early and uninterrupted English learning is favored, and there are some schools of high migrant density where the children's needs are not being met due to inadequate teacher training, despite teacher interest and effort. While migrant children's presence in school does not cause problems, lack of effective communication with parents has become problematic, and efforts are being made to make ethnic parents active school and community participants. (MSE)

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THE LEARNERS' NATIVE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO IMMIGRANTS IN AUSTRALIA

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On my sabbatical from the University of Oulu in the spring of 1977 I had the opportunity of doing some research in Australia concerning the courses, materials, and methods used when teaching English to migrants (immigrants) and the school achievement of Finnish children in Australia. (The latter, by the way, is good and thus differs from the educational standards reached by Finnish migrant children in Sweden.) While doing the research work I paid attention to the ways in which the learner's native language and culture were taken into consideration in teaching English to both adult and child migrants and the role of immigrants in the Australian community.

The Commonwealth of Australia launched its scheme of teaching English to adult migrants in the late 1940s. Some of the courses inaugurated then are still popular, e.g. the evening continuation classes and instruction by radio and correspondence. At times, bilingual methods were used and the trend seems to be in the same direction again. At about the same time, slightly over 30 years ago, attempts were made to educate the Australian people in their attitude to accept rather than reject migrants. Within the last ten years, the development has been fast in both areas.

Today there are various full-time courses, intensive courses and accelerated courses. The students are paid a living allowance while attending them. There are part-time accelerated courses, particularly suited to shift-workers and housewives; industrial and professional courses, rehabilitation courses in hospitals, instruction via TV, and classes run by volunteers. The migrants are shown in many ways that they are cared for.

Australia's versatile efforts to teach English to immigrants and the appreciation of ethnic groups have progressed together with the standard of living and education. However, there is still much to do in overcoming prejudice between and within the various groups and in creating a well-integrated multicultural society.

It is interesting to notice the change of tone in demographic books within a few years. The first volume of Population and Australia, published

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in Canberra in 1975, suggests when dealing with the ethnic origins of immigrants that the migrants' cultural and social impact should not be overestimated. On the last pages of the Supplementary Report, published three years later (1978), the National Population Inquiry refers to the emphasis there is at the moment on the merits of multiculturalism and the establishment of the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council in 1977. But it does not neglect to mention that most immigrants were born in the British Isles and the predominant feature of Australian 'ethnicity' is an overwhelming majority, primarily Anglo-Saxon, who communicate easily because they understand one another's language, political system, religious and social customs, etc., and a very diversified minority in which many have little understanding of the majority language and culture.

The child migrant education program was introduced as late as 1970. There are several good models of solving the problems in this area, but more resources, e.g. specially trained teachers of English as a second (or foreign) language, are badly needed. One fourth of Australia's population now comes from non-English speaking backgrounds. It is estimated that only 1/3 of the children needing special instruction in English are getting any so far.

The importance of learning English is not questioned, but on the other hand it is noteworthy that though the migrant child is taught the language of the majority and given instruction about Australia, he is at the same time encouraged to retain and respect his mother tongue and cultural heritage, nowadays considered values to be preserved. Besides ethnic schools, there are schools providing instruction in the child's native language and some others with bilingual curricula.

It has been necessary to re-educate the Australian public as concerns the value of bilingual education particularly at the primary level. The sudden change of policy may have puzzled the parents as well. For years they were persuaded by Australian teachers to believe that hearing and speaking nothing but English was vitally important for their children to succeed at school.

As Australian specialists consider English an extremely difficult language, they recommend an early start. Many of them are also in favour of an uninterrupted process of concept formation in the learner's mother tongue. Bilingual education combines the two. It is also believed that children are helped to develop as whole persons if they are given an opportunity of using and reinforcing their ethnic language. I quote an Australian headmaster: "If by actively maintaining an ethnic language we do nothing more than give

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people the impression that we respect their language and culture, we will have done much that is positive by way of fostering family unity and security, and confidence in their new country."

However, there are schools of high migrant density where the children's needs are neglected. The staff are often completely unaware of the backgrounds of the pupils they teach. They also lack training in linguistics, have never studied another language, and know little of language development in children.

I found that the teachers qualified to teach English as a second language were efficient, devoted to their work and sincerely interested in their students and their ethnic-cultural backgrounds. They tried to get acquainted with their pupils on a personal basis, understand their particular problems, and help them in difficulties caused by language.

In a mining town in northern Queensland I observed a teacher giving tuition in English simultaneously to two levels, three generations, and a number of nationalities in an evening continuation class. The next day he travelled from school to school giving special instruction in English to migrant children during their normal English lessons. For one period, for instance, he taught two refugee boys from Laos, brothers aged 12 and 13. The boys were starting their study of the language and were well motivated to learn it in its written form as well. The teacher knew what sort of language problems were to be expected as a result of the boys' tonal mother tongue and the Sanskrit script, and what kind of special help they needed.

Ethnic background papers and other publications provide useful information about the learners' social, cultural and economic background. They help the teacher in picking out suitable topics for presentation and discussion in class. Informative articles on English language difficulties of migrant students are published e.g. in English a New Language, a bulletin for teachers of new Australians in continuation classes. In its June issue 1971, some areas of difficulty for Finnish students of English are dealt with as well as some of Hungarian and Italian students.

A number of the migrant teachers I interviewed had worked as English teachers outside Australia, usually in a European or Asian country. They considered this experience invaluable in their present occupation. They had gained a new perspective to their own language, were now better acquainted with its structure and understood the problems that learners encounter when learning it as a foreign language.

When I interviewed school principals in various parts of Australia, they hardly ever made any complaints of the migrant children. "They are no

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problem, but the parents are." The lack of effective communication causes misunderstanding between schools and ethnic families. Bridging the gap is not easy. School reports written in English are sometimes tragically misinterpreted. There is a story of a Greek boy in South Australia whose teacher wrote in his report under the heading "Class participation" the favourable comment "often takes part in class discussions". His parents thought it meant "often talks in class" and punished him severely.

Steps are being taken to make ethnic parents active participants in school and community life. Their contribution would be valuable in promoting mutual understanding and strengthening the multicultural atmosphere. Plans have been made to involve them in teaching and learning.

Recently the Australian government introduced some innovations in the field of adult migrant education. These include, for example, multiclass centres providing tuition at a variety of levels; day classes for women (often in association with schools); family classes at community centres; classes held to provide tuition for members of various ethnic organisations; classes to enable the parents of children attending ethnic schools to receive tuition in English while their children receive tuition in their parents' first language, etc.

It has been realized that (1) Australian society is multicultural; (2) minorities and majorities have rights; and (3) the home, the peer group, the media and school are institutions influencing the child. It is a tremendous challenge for the Commonwealth of Australia and the ethnic groups themselves to solve the problems concerning adult and child migrant education. The government has encouraged the introduction of migrant education into the training of all teachers. For graduate teachers there are seminars and courses which acquaint them with migrant majority and minority groups, the difficulties caused by various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and the teacher's role in such an environment. These courses could be extended to pre-service training.

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